

Whose Site Is It Anyway? Expectations of College Web sites

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An examination of college Web site preferences of high school students, parents/guardians of high school students, and high school guidance and admissions counselors suggests that offering dialogic Internet features could impact the likelihood of submitting applications. The findings also show that intuitive interface and useful information that generate return visits take precedence over flashy graphics, photos, and interactive features.

INTRODUCTION

Given the increase in the number of traditional students, institutions of higher education are vying for attention as high schoolers begin their college search (Tucciarone, 2007). Stickler (2006) argues that if colleges want to attract new students, they must center on the customer: the student. Many influencers affect high schoolers' college choices (Tucciarone, 2007); the most important social influencer is the family because of its longevity and the intensity of its relationships (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett, 2006). College choice can also be dictated by social forces such as high school guidance counselors (Cole, 2006). Reports also show that the Web ranks second only to campus visits as the most important source for researching colleges (Abrahamson, 2000).

Public relations practitioners have become an important part of not only attracting students, but also redefining the college's relationship to them and their families. By maintaining dialogue, colleges can redefine existing relationships and proactively build ongoing relationships with the diverse constituency base. The highly competitive nature of college Web sites suggests a need to study and address the needs and preferences of both current and prospective Web users (Kiang Ng, 2003). McAllister-Spooner (2009) issued a call for researchers to evaluate the effectiveness dialogic features by analyzing input and feedback from users. This study seeks to answer the calls and fill the voids in the literature.

Viewed through the lens of the dialogic theory of public relations, the purpose of this study is to examine college Web site preferences of high school students, parents/guardians of high school students, and high school guidance and admissions counselors. Developed as an honest and ethical means to guide practitioners and

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scholars in the creation and maintenance of effective organization–public relationships (Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003), the dialogic theory of public relations is an appropriate lens through which to explore the mediated communication practices of colleges and universities. Highly resource dependent organizations that serve multiple publics, an examination of the public relations practices of colleges and universities can identify relationship-building strategies and tactics for similar services-oriented organizations (profit and nonprofit).

The article is divided into three sections. The first part reviews the literature on higher education, public relations, dialogue, and the Internet. The second part outlines the methodology used to study the perceived importance of dialogic Internet features. The final sections report and discuss the implications of this study for Web-based relationship building between colleges and universities, prospective students, and parents of prospective students. To contextualize the importance of dialogic Internet principles as they relate to cultivating relationships between colleges and high students, parents/guardians of high school students, and high school guidance personnel, the next section will provide the contextual and theoretical frameworks guiding the study.

Higher Education, Public Relations, Dialogue, and the World Wide Web

The number of high school graduates is expected to increase nationally by 15%, and, between 2006 and 2017, total enrollment at degree-granting institutions will increase by 16% (Hussar & Bailey 2008). Driven by the increased competition for enrollees, colleges and universities have begun to place greater emphasis on researching students (Glass, 2004).

Social networks may be at least as potent in facilitating college choice as a student's individual agency or judgment (Plank & Jordan, 2001). Although the most potent social influencer is the family (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett, 2006), high school counselors help create and shape students' and parents' perceptions and expectations of potential college options (McDonough, 2005).

The importance of the Web in the college selection process has been well established (Poock & Andrews Bishop, 2006). The Internet provides an opportunity to expand the role of public relations (Gower & Cho, 2001). Higher education institutions are especially in need of public relations efforts because public relations practitioners have become an important part of not only attracting students, but also redefining the college's relationship to them. By maintaining dialogue, colleges can redefine existing relationships and proactively build ongoing relationships with the diverse constituency base. As set forth by Kent et al. (2003), for organizations, Web sites provide a controlled channel through which they can communicate with stakeholders. For stakeholders, Web sites provide publics with a channel through which organizations can be viewed and better understood (p. 63).

Dialogic public relations is considered one of the most ethical and effective approaches to practicing public relations (Kent et al., 2003). Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) offered five principles to serve as guidelines for the successful integration of

dialogic public relations via the World Wide Web. Kent and Taylor's five principles serve as a useful means of operationalizing relationship theory concepts (Reber & Kim, 2006): *Useful Information*, suggests that organizations provide information of general value to all publics in a logical hierarchical structure, *Ease of Interface*, involves the intuitiveness and/or ease of the site's interface; *Conservation of Visitors*, maintains that Web sites should offer features and links that value and conserve visit time; *Generation of Return Visits*, explores ways to create the foundation for long lasting relationships by offering features that generate return visits, and *Dialogic Feedback Loops*, allows publics to query organizations and offers organizations the opportunity to respond to questions (Kent & Taylor 1998, p. 327).

The breadth and depth of research exploring Kent and Taylor's (1998, 2002) dialogic principles extends to various organization types such as nonprofit activist organizations (Kent et al., 2003; Reber & Kim, 2006; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Taylor, Kent & White, 2001), *Fortune 500* companies (Esrock & Leichty, 1999, 2000; Park & Reber, 2008), congressional Web sites (Taylor & Kent, 2004), and litigation public relations firms (Reber, Gower & Robinson, 2006). The dialogic principles are also receiving increased attention in research exploring Web-based communication practices of colleges and universities (Gordon & Berhow, 2009; Kang & Norton, 2006; McAllister-Spooner, 2008; McAllister-Spooner & Taylor, 2007). The next section will provide a brief overview of the studies which focused primarily on dialogic feature utilization by colleges and universities.

Kang and Norton (2006) found that universities excelled in the areas of ease of interface, providing useful information, and offering features that conserve visit time and generate return visits but were greatly lacking in the area creating synchronous dialogic loops with targeted publics. These findings were supported in research exploring community colleges (McAllister-Spooner & Taylor, 2007), which found that the absence of feedback opportunities essentially makes these sites one-way communication tools. The authors argue that this sender-to-receiver focus is not helping to build relationships among key publics (McAllister-Spooner & Taylor, 2007).

Will and Callison (2006) found that prospective donors were the most often-targeted public, followed by faculty/staff, and then prospective and current students. Gordon and Berhow (2009) found that liberal arts institutions tend to use more dialogic Web features than national doctoral universities. A small correlation was also detected between the use of dialogic features on the Web sites and higher rates of student retention and alumni giving (Gordon & Berhow, 2009).

Regarding users' perceptions of college Web sites, inspiration was drawn from Abrahamson (2000), McAllister-Spooner (2008), Mechitove, Moshkovich and Taylor (2001), Pooch and Lefond (2001, 2003), and Pooch and Andrews Bishop (2006). The next section will review literature exploring user perceptions of college and university Web sites.

User Perceptions of College Web sites

Mechitove et al. (2001) found that the most crucial parameters influencing overall perception of Web site effectiveness by students reflected issues of information content, entertainment value, and site design. Pooch and Lefond (2001, 2003) found that users prefer college Web sites with an organization that is logical, easy to follow, and a design tailored to the prospective student. The findings also reveal the following elements that increase the likelihood of prospects submitting applications: designing prospect sections of the site with a strategic purpose, and including information that is tailored to the individual (Pooch & Lefond, 2001). Other important factors include: the time it took the users to find the information, organization by functional areas (i.e. admissions, academics), download speed, and easy access to online applications and instructions (Pooch & Lefond, 2001, 2003).

In an examination of community college Web sites, Pooch and Andrews Bishop (2006) also found that organization and content are highly valued. Unlike previous studies, however, many participants did not utilize the Web in their application process (Pooch & Andrews Bishop, 2006). A usability study conducted by McAllister-Spooner (2008) found that, despite the fact that participants could not find more than half of the content sought, users did not have strong feelings for or against the sites; users only had negative reactions to the lack of *Dialogic Feedback Loop* features (McAllister-Spooner, 2008).

The works of Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002), Pooch and Lefond (2001, 2003), Pooch and Andrews Bishop (2006), McAllister-Spooner (2008), and others provide fertile ground to explore. Utilization of Kent and Taylor's Internet principles can increase the relationship-building function with critical publics, namely high school students, parents/guardians of high school students, and high school guidance counselors. The next section describes the research design and methodology used to assess perceptions of relationship building and dialogic features of college Web sites.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Organizational Web sites play a critical role in cultivating relationships with key publics. The importance of the Web in the college selection process has been well established (Abrahamson, 2000; Pooch & Andrews Bishop, 2006). Public relations practitioners and scholars argue for the use of Kent and Taylor's Internet principles to cultivate relationships. McAllister-Spooner (2009) issued a call for researchers to evaluate the effectiveness of dialogic features by analyzing input and feedback from users. This study seeks to answer the calls and fill the voids in the literature by posing the first research question.

RQ1. What dialogic features of college/university Web sites do high school students, parents/guardians of high school students, and high school admissions and guidance counselors seek?

Pooch and Lefond (2001) found that users prefer college Web sites that are organized, and offer information that is tailored to the individual. According to Kent and

Taylor (1998), "Information is made available to publics not to stifle debate or win their assent, but to allow them to engage an organization in dialogue as an informed partner" (p. 328). In this study, this principle is applied to high school students, parents/guardians of high school students, and high school guidance counselors as publics. The second research question seeks to identify similarities and differences between the preferences.

RQ2. What are the similarities and differences between the preferences of high school students, the parents/guardians of high school students, and high school guidance counselors?

Poock and Lefond (2001) found that availability of certain information and features may increase the likelihood of prospects submitting applications. This study seeks to explore the impact of dialogic feature utilization on application submissions by posing the third research question.

RQ3. Which, if any, dialogic features do high school students, parents/guardians of high school students, and high school guidance counselors believe increase the likelihood of submitting applications?

Perceptions of the importance and need for the five principles of dialogue developed by Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) as they relate to college selection and application decisions were assessed via Web-based survey research.

The sample surveyed includes a voluntary snowball sample high school students, parents/guardians of high school students, and high school guidance counselors affiliated with the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC, 2006). An e-mail request was sent to the high school guidance and college admissions counselors requesting that they complete the survey, and disseminate the link to the online survey to students and their respective parents/guardians. Three follow-up e-mails were sent after the initial invitation. The link to the online survey contains a request for consent on the introductory page; completion of the survey, therefore, implies consent. The confidentiality of the subjects was preserved in all phases of the research. The survey responses were collected on secure servers; the study was conducted in a manner that does not allow linkage of participant names with individual data. Furthermore, the data—reported in summary statistics only—does not allow others to identify individual participants.

Based on the research design of McAllister-Spooner (2008), questions on the survey instrument about Web site design and navigability, usefulness of information, generation of return visits, the rule of conservation, the potential for feedback (dialogic loop), and functionality tap into the underlying construct of dialogic communication. All measures are on the following five-point Likert scale: "1" (very important), ".05" (somewhat important), "0" (neutral assessment), "-.05" (unimportant), and "-1" (very unimportant). Means and standard deviations of the collective features were calculated

and reported. As set forth by Poock and Lefond (2001, 2003), content and visual elements are clustered into two categories: admissions/academic and environmental.

To gain an understanding as to the most important Internet feature, an open-ended question was posed to the respondents asking, "All other things being equal, what, if any, is the single most important Internet feature that would influence your decision to submit an application?"

With a review of the research design and methodology in place, the next section will report the findings.

RESULTS

Sample Descriptives

The survey sample is comprised of 86 U.S.-based high school students, 96 U.S.-based parents/guardians of high school students, and 69 U.S.-based high school guidance counselors (N = 251). Fourteen percent of the student participants are freshman (n = 12), 10% are sophomores (n = 9), 32% are juniors (n = 27), and 44% are seniors (n = 38). Nearly 89% of the students responded that they are "likely" or "certain" to attend college (n = 76). Of the 96 parents/guardians of high school students that participated, 23% are parents of freshman (n = 22), 15% are parents of sophomores (n = 14), 23% are parents of juniors (n = 22), and 38% are parents of seniors (n = 36). Over 90% of the parents/guardians responded that they are certain that their child would attend college (n = 85).

The breakdown of self-perceived Internet experience for the students participants (n = 86) is: 21% "expert" (n = 18), 60% "experienced" (n = 52), 18% "fair" (n = 15), and 1% "novice" (n = 1). The breakdown of self-perceived Internet experience for the parent/guardian participants (n = 96) is: 11% "expert" (n = 11), 67% "experienced" (n = 64), 20% "fair" (n = 15), and 2% "novice" (n = 2). The breakdown of self-perceived Internet experience for the high school guidance counselors (n = 69) is: 20% "expert" (n = 14), 67% "experienced" (n = 46), 13% "fair" (n = 9), and none indicated "novice" (n = 0).

The respondents overwhelmingly use the Web sites as the main source of college information: 82 % of the students (n = 70), 82% of the parents (n = 78), and 86% of the high school guidance and admissions counselors (n = 59). Other sources used include catalogs, Viewbooks, and college search software programs such as Naviance or college search publications such as Barons.

Dialogic Feature Preferences and Expectations

RQ 1 asked which dialogic features of college/university Web sites do high school students, parents/guardians of high school students, and high school guidance and admissions counselors seek, and RQ2 asked about the similarities and differences between the preferences of the three publics. Table 1 reports the findings.

Useful academic and environmental information. The perceived importance of offering admissions and academic content is high for all three publics (7 items, $N = 251$, $M = .71$, $SD = .180$): high school students ($n = 86$, $M = .72$, $SD = .11$), parents/guardians of high school students ($n = 96$, $M = .72$, $SD = .20$), and high school counselors ($n = 69$, $M = .70$, $SD = .25$). The environmental information received lower scores (11 items, $N = 251$, $M = .45$, $SD = .147$): high school students ($n = 86$, $M = .45$, $SD = .15$), parents/guardians ($n = 96$, $M = .44$, $SD = .18$), and high school counselors ($n = 69$, $M = .44$, $SD = .16$).

Academic and environmental information that generates return visits. The perceived importance of offering academic content that generates return visits is also high (7 items, $N = 251$, $M = .67$, $SD = .147$): students ($n = 86$, $M = .62$, $SD = .14$), parents/guardians of high school students ($n = 96$, $M = .64$, $SD = .16$), and high school counselors ($n = 69$, $M = .76$, $SD = .15$). The environmental information that generates return visits is perceived as less important than academic information (12 items, $N = 251$, $M = .29$, $SD = .292$): students ($n = 86$, $M = .30$, $SD = .30$), parents/guardians ($n = 96$, $M = .26$, $SD = .31$), and high school counselors ($n = 69$, $M = .30$, $SD = .27$).

Features that conserve visit time. The three groups have neutral perceptions about features that conserve visits (6 items, $N = 251$, $M = .17$, $SD = .342$): students ($n = 86$, $M = .16$, $SD = .30$), parents/guardians of high school students ($n = 96$, $M = .11$, $SD = .38$), and high school counselors ($n = 69$, $M = .25$, $SD = .37$).

According to Kent and Taylor (1998), although photographs and other graphics make Web pages attractive, they can increase substantially the time required for a user to load a page. To examine the impact that slow download speed could have on the relationship-building potential with potential students and the parents/guardians of potential students, the respondents were asked the maximum amount of time they would wait for a college or university Web site to open before abandoning the Web search.

For the students, 4% would abandon the site after 1-3 seconds ($n = 3$), 19% would abandon the site after 4-6 seconds ($n = 16$), 28% would abandon the site after 7-9 seconds ($n = 24$), and 50% would abandon the site if the site took longer than 10 seconds ($n = 43$). The parents/guardians had similar reactions. Seven percent would abandon the site after 1-3 seconds ($n = 7$), 20% would abandon the site after 4-6 seconds ($n = 19$), 30% would abandon the site after 7-9 seconds ($n = 29$), and 43% would abandon the site if the site took longer than 10 seconds ($n = 41$). Six percent of the guidance counselors would abandon the site after 1-3 seconds ($n = 4$), 25% would abandon the site after 4-6 seconds ($n = 17$), 24% would abandon the site after 7-9 seconds ($n = 16$), and 45% would abandon the site if the site took longer than 10 seconds ($n = 32$).

Interactive features that facilitate dialogue. Overall, the three groups have relatively neutral perceptions about interactive features that facilitate dialogue (9 items,

$N = 251$, $M = .21$, $SD = .276$): students ($n = 86$, $M = .22$, $SD = .28$), parents/guardians ($n = 96$, $M = .16$, $SD = .32$), and high school counselors ($n = 69$, $M = .26$, $SD = .25$).

Dialogic Features That Would Increase Likelihood of Submitting Applications

RQ 3 asked which, if any, dialogic features do high school students, parents/guardians of high school students, and high school guidance counselors believe increase the likelihood of submitting applications? Recall, this question was posed as an open-ended question. Seventy-two percent of the students responded ($n = 62$), 76% of the parents/guardians ($n = 73$), and 77% of the counselors responded ($n = 53$). The researcher detected several common themes in the responses. Table 2 reports the responses, as they relate to Kent and Taylor's dialogic Internet features.

For the students, 9% indicated usable/navigable layout (Ease of Interface) ($n = 12$), 15% indicated academic information on majors (Useful Information – academic/admissions) ($n = 9$), 11% indicated description of student life (Useful Information – environmental), 10% indicated campus visuals/photos (Generation of Return Visits – environmental) ($n = 6$), 8% indicated admissions facts/requirements (Useful Information – academic/admissions) and easy/free online application (Generation of Return Visits - academic/admissions), 5% indicated cost/tuition (Useful Information - academic/admissions) and FAQs/Essential facts (Generation of Return Visits - academic/admissions) ($n = 3$), 3% indicated interactive features (Dialogic Feedback Loop) ($n = 2$), and 2% indicated printable application facts (Generation of Return Visits - academic/admissions) and information on financial aid and scholarships (Useful Information – academic/admissions) ($n = 1$).

For the parents, 22% of the respondents indicated usable/navigable layout (Ease of Interface) and an easy/free online application (Generation of Return Visits - academic/admissions) ($n = 16$). Fourteen percent indicated academic information on majors (Useful Information – academic/admissions) ($n = 10$), 11% indicated admissions facts/requirements (Useful Information – academic/admissions) ($n = 8$), 7% indicated campus visuals/photos (Generation of Return Visits – environmental) ($n = 5$), 5% indicated description of student life (Useful Information – environmental) ($n = 4$), 4% indicated information on financial aid and scholarships (Useful Information – academic/admissions) and FAQs/Essential facts (Generation of Return Visits - academic/admissions) ($n = 3$), and 3% indicated interactive features (Dialogic Feedback Loop) ($n = 2$). Interestingly, unlike the students, none of the parents/guardians indicated cost/tuition, or access to a printable application.

For the guidance counselors, 28% indicated easy/free online application (Ease of Interface) ($n = 20$), 26% indicated usable/navigable layout (Ease of Interface) ($n = 18$), 8% indicated academic information on majors and admissions facts/requirements (Useful Information – academic/admissions) ($n = 5$), 6% indicated FAQs/Essential facts (Generation of Return Visits - academic/admissions), campus visuals/photos (Generation of Return Visits – environmental), and interactive features ($n = 4$), 4% indicated printable application facts (Generation of Return Visits - academic/admissions) ($n = 3$), and 2% indicated cost/tuition (Useful Information - academic/admissions), and

information on financial aid and scholarships (Useful Information – academic/admissions) (n = 1).

With a review of the data analysis in place, the next section will discuss the theoretical, methodological, and practical implications for the study of college Web site preferences of high school students, parents/guardians of high school students, and high school guidance counselors, viewed through the lens of the dialogic theory of public relations.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study of college Web site preferences shed light on the Web experiences and expectations of three important publics, high school students, parents/guardians of high school students, and high school guidance counselors. First, the findings suggest that the levels of Internet use and experience may be leveling out among generations. Secondly, the similarities between and among the generations also extend to preferred content, site performance, and interactivity. Moreover, the respondents indicated that many of Kent and Taylor's dialogic Internet features may increase the likelihood of submitting applications.

Leveling out the Playing Field

Larger percentages of older generations are online now than in the past and they are doing more activities online (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2009). These findings are supported in the current study. The self-perceived Internet experiences for the student participants and the parent/guardian participants, as well as the guidance counselors, are notably similar. The self-reported experience of over 80% of the respondents are "experienced" or "expert." As reported earlier, reports show that the Web ranks second only to campus visits as the most important source for researching colleges (Abrahamson, 2000). These findings are supported in the current study. Over 80% of the respondents indicated that the Web site is the main source used to review colleges. Kids, their parents, and in this case, their guidance counselors, may not be from different planets. At least, that is, when it comes to expectations and preferences of college Web sites. The similarities between and among the generations extends to preferred content, site performance, and interactivity.

Useful Academic Information that Generate Return Visits Rated as Most Important

Prior research indicates that availability of useful academic and admissions content is the most crucial parameter influencing perceptions of college Web sites (McAllister-Spooner, 2008; Mechtovet et al., 2001; Poock & Lefond, 2001, 2003; Poock & Andrews Bishop, 2006). These findings are supported in the current study. Although there are slight variations between the separate features, the respondents indicated that useful academic and admissions information that generate return visits is more important than environmental information.

Don't Make Me Think: Intuitive Interface Emerges as Most Important

Ease of interface is one predictor of dialogic potential because if a site is not “user friendly,” then visitors may not have a positive experience and may not be encouraged to return (Taylor et al., 2001). According to usability expert Steve Krug (2000), the number one rule to consider when designing or managing a Web site is “Don’t make me think!” In other words, Web pages should be “self-evident, obvious, and self-explanatory” – to the point that users should be able to “get it without expending any effort thinking about it” (p. 11). Pooch and Lefond (2001, 2003) found that college Web sites should have an organization that is logical, easy to follow, and a design tailored to the prospective student. Instead of organizing the information in an egocentric fashion that mirrors the formal organizational chart which makes little sense to prospective students, Whiteside and Mentz (2003) argue that the information should be displayed in a logical sequence that clearly guides the user through the admissions process. These findings were supported in the current study. The respondents overwhelmingly indicated that it is important for college and university Web sites to have attractive layout and design and an intuitive navigation.

Because colleges have a myriad of constituent groups, Pooch and Lefond (2001, 2003) suggest that the most efficient and effective method for providing information is organizing the home page according to the target audiences. These findings were also supported. The respondents indicated that college Web sites should offer tabs for different publics and that the site be organized by function (i.e. academics, athletics, etc).

Based on the research design of Taylor et al. (2001), the rule of conservation of visitors in this study focused primarily on the amount of time that the site loaded on a medium speed, networked computer. Users of college and university Web sites are keenly sensitive to the speed with which they could access Web pages (Pooch & Lefond, 2001). In the current analysis the respondents indicated that it is important that sites have a quick download speed. Additionally, nearly half of the respondents indicated that they would abandon the site if it took more than 10 seconds to open.

Pooch and Lefond (2001) also found that search engines were very popular, especially for technologically savvy students familiar with the Internet. Images and graphics can negatively impact Web site speed. The respondents of the current study indicated that colleges should offer search functions and site maps that can speed up the experience, instead of slow it down with flashy graphics.

Interactivity

At first glance, the data suggests that students, parents, and guidance counselors have relatively neutral perceptions about the importance of having interactive (dialogic) features on college Web sites. A closer examination of the data, however, reveals that certain features are perceived as more important than others. For example, all groups believe that it is important for colleges to offer links to online visit requests and to ask questions. They also believe that they should be able to give opinions, and fill out online surveys, Although instant messaging, social networking, and blogging have gained ground as communications tools (Pew Internet & American Life

Project, 2009), the respondents do not think that it is important for colleges to offer opportunities for instant messaging or text messaging, or to have live chats with admissions and financial aid officers.

Taking the First Step to Develop Relationships

In higher education, the first indication that a positive relationship is being formed with prospective students is the actual submission of an application. With college Web sites ranked as one of the most important sources for researching colleges, examination of Internet features that would increase the likelihood of submitting applications is of critical importance.

The findings of the current study are compelling. The respondents indicated that many of Kent and Taylor's dialogic Internet features would increase the likelihood of submitting applications. Ease of interface, and useful academic and admissions information that generate return visits emerged as key indicators that would increase the likelihood of submitting an application. The interactive (dialogic feedback) features, although perceived as important, were not strong indicators that would increase the likelihood of submitting an application.

LIMITATIONS

As with all studies, there are limitations that must be acknowledged. Self-selection occurs when the entities in the sample are given a choice to participate. The data was collected from a relatively small convenience sample that opted to participate. Despite the limitations, the frameworks developed in this study suggest specific themes that can be tested in future research. To validate and extend the generalizability of the results, future researchers should consider replicating the study with a different and larger sample. To explore whether differences and similarities exist within families, future researchers may also consider matching the student data with that of their respective parents/guardians. Future researchers might also seek to measure perceived affinity with the colleges after viewing the sites rather than attitude toward specific characteristics.

CONCLUSION

The WWW remains the primary means by which prospective students, their parents, and their guidance counselors research colleges. This study provides valuable insight into the expectations of three critical publics which should be valuable to public relations practitioners seeking the most effective means to build long-lasting relationships through dialogic Internet practices.

Table 1

Perceived Importance of Dialogic Features

Scale Item	Students (n = 86)		Parents (n = 96)		Counselors (n = 69)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Combined Means and Standard Deviations (N = 251)						
Useful Information – Admissions/Academic (7 items, $M = .71$, $SD = .180$)	$(M = .72, SD = .11)$		$(M = .72, SD = .20)$		$(M = .70, SD = .25)$	
Admissions requirements ($M = .92$, $SD = .204$)	.85	.266	.94	.167	.98	.133
Application process ($M = .84$, $SD = .273$)	.77	.335	.87	.245	.89	.207
Cost information (tuition, room, board etc.) ($M = .82$, $SD = .308$)	.79	.322	.84	.306	.82	.295
Courses offered ($M = .71$, $SD = .374$)	.81	.300	.70	.383	.59	.411
Degrees available ($M = .73$, $SD = .362$)	.70	.391	.76	.364	.74	.327
Financial aid options ($M = .60$, $SD = .482$)	.61	.475	.53	.528	.69	.410
Registration instructions ($M = .38$, $SD = .539$)	.53	.471	.37	.565	.22	.539
Useful Information – Environmental	$(M = .45, SD = .15)$		$(M = .44, SD = .18)$		$(M = .44, SD = .16)$	

(11 items, $M = .45$, $SD = .147$)

Athletic information	.32	.661	.24	.527	.44	.413
($M = .33$, $SD = .552$)						
Campus clubs/activities	.61	.404	.43	.383	.49	.380
($M = .51$, $SD = .395$)						
Campus security/crime reports	.39	.468	.53	.430	.41	.450
($M = .45$, $SD = .458$)						
Class sizes	.63	.385	.63	.396	.61	.321
($M = .63$, $SD = .372$)						
Demographics of student body	.40	.559	.50	.419	.62	.421
($M = .50$, $SD = .477$)						
Dining services	.45	.463	.38	.411	.36	.392
($M = .40$, $SD = .424$)						
Housing information	.64	.392	.78	.324	.68	.351
($M = .70$, $SD = .360$)						
Job opportunities on campus	.39	.515	.20	.482	.20	.464
($M = .26$, $SD = .495$)						
Rules and regulations for student behavior	.30	.549	.25	.478	.17	.513
($M = .25$, $SD = .513$)						
Surrounding town/community	.61	.461	.54	.427	.49	.376
($M = .55$, $SD = .410$)						
Vision/Mission Statement	.22	.588	.42	.451	.38	.517
($M = .34$, $SD = .525$)						

Ease of Interface	(<i>M</i> = .66, <i>SD</i> =.26)	(<i>M</i> = .69, <i>SD</i> =.21)	(<i>M</i> = .82, <i>SD</i> =.16)			
(4 items, <i>M</i> = .71, <i>SD</i> = .209)						
Attractive layout and design	.28	.526	.42	.419	.60	.348
(<i>M</i> = .42, <i>SD</i> = .457)						
Intuitive navigation	.81	.318	.90	.213	.99	.085
(<i>M</i> = .89, <i>SD</i> = .241)						
Organized by function (academics, athletics etc.)	.85	.257	.81	.312	.84	.264
(<i>M</i> = .83, <i>SD</i> = .281)						
Tab/page for future students	.71	.368	.64	.480	.84	.251
(<i>M</i> = .72, <i>SD</i> = .395)						
Conservation of Visits	(<i>M</i> = .16, <i>SD</i> =.30)	(<i>M</i> = .11, <i>SD</i> =.38)	(<i>M</i> = .25, <i>SD</i> =.37)			
(6 items, <i>M</i> = .17, <i>SD</i> = .342)						
Flashy graphics (some)	.16	.495	-.05	.428	.17	.444
(<i>M</i> = .09, <i>SD</i> = .466)						
Flashy graphics (a lot)	-.20	.479	-.34	.413	-.19	.400
(<i>M</i> = -.25, <i>SD</i> = .437)						
Quick download speed	.35	.523	.61	.401	.78	.317
(<i>M</i> = .57, <i>SD</i> = .460)						
Search function	.43	.522	.30	.579	.44	.529
(<i>M</i> = .38, <i>SD</i> = .548)						
Site map	.46	.495	.39	.557	.43	.461
(<i>M</i> = .43, <i>SD</i> = .510)						

View site with images off	-19	.608	-.24	.449	-.12	.474
<i>(M = -.19, SD = .515)</i>						
Generate Return Visits – Admissions/Academic	<i>(M = .62, SD =.14)</i>		<i>(M = .64, SD =.16)</i>		<i>(M = .76, SD =.15)</i>	
<i>(5 items, M = .67, SD = .147)</i>						
Click and submit admissions applications	.73	.365	.79	.323	.94	.183
<i>(M = .81, SD = .316)</i>						
Click and submit financial aid applications	.56	.458	.52	.518	.67	.401
<i>(M = .58, SD = .470)</i>						
Downloadable applications and forms	.81	.343	.84	.255	.91	.191
<i>(M = .85, SD = .274)</i>						
Financial aid estimator	.46	.491	.51	.508	.67	.443
<i>(M = .54, SD = .490)</i>						
Tuition calculator	.56	.463	.55	.490	.61	.443
<i>(M = .57, SD = .466)</i>						
Generate Return Visits – Environmental	<i>(M = .30, SD =.30)</i>		<i>(M = .26, SD =.31)</i>		<i>(M = .30, SD =.27)</i>	
<i>(12 items, M = .29, SD = .292)</i>						
Calendar	.36	.465	.41	.483	.33	.443
<i>(M = .37, SD = .465)</i>						
News and events	.26	.551	.29	.465	.27	.440
<i>(M = .27, SD = .487)</i>						
Personalize Web page feature	-.14	.528	-.27	.491	-.15	.461
<i>(M = -.19, SD = .497)</i>						
Pictures of campus	.83	.317	.79	.268	.82	.330

($M = .81, SD = .302$)						
Pictures of dorms/housing	.84	.273	.69	.328	.63	.358
($M = .72, SD = .330$)						
Pictures of faculty	.18	.553	.31	.451	.28	.558
($M = .12, SD = .487$)						
Pictures of students	.15	.543	.22	.458	.37	.448
($M = .24, SD = .490$)						
Podcasts	-.03	.530	-.04	.458	.12	.471
($M = .01, SD = .489$)						
Profiles of alumni	.11	.583	-.02	.463	.09	.472
($M = .06, SD = .510$)						
Profiles of faculty	.27	.565	.09	.427	.28	.558
($M = .29, SD = .492$)						
Profiles of students/student leaders	.22	.559	.12	.471	.22	.458
($M = .18, SD = .499$)						
Virtual campus tours	.54	.410	.57	.446	.57	.414
($M = .56, SD = .424$)						
Dialogic Feedback Loop		($M = .22, SD = .28$)	($M = .16, SD = .32$)	($M = .26, SD = .25$)		
(9 items, $M = .21, SD = .276$)						
Blogs	.00	.537	-.17	.446	.12	.457
($M = -.03, SD = .494$)						
Instant messaging	-.08	.497	-.11	.483	.08	.470
($M = -.04, SD = .489$)						

Links to ask questions	.61	.419	.58	.397	.58	.399
<i>(M = .59, SD = .403)</i>						
Links to give opinions	.29	.541	.15	.490	.17	.516
<i>(M = .20, SD = .516)</i>						
Live chats with admissions officers	.20	.555	.24	.555	.41	.461
<i>(M = .28, SD = .535)</i>						
Live chats with financial aid counselors	.12	.584	.05	.573	.30	.494
<i>(M = .14, SD = .563)</i>						
Online surveys	.28	.562	.10	.524	-.01	.546
<i>(M = .13, SD = .553)</i>						
Online visit request	.70	.363	.74	.299	.66	.361
<i>(M = .70, SD = .339)</i>						
Text messaging	-.09	.550	-.16	.505	.00	.465
<i>(M = -.09, SD = .512)</i>						

Table 2

Single Feature that Would Increase Likelihood of Submitting Application

Features indicated by respondents	Students (N = 86, n = 62)		Parents (N = 96, n = 73)		Counselors (N = 69, n = 53)	
	n	n%	n	n%	n	n%
Ease of Interface						
Usable/navigable layout	12	19	16	22	18	26
Useful information – academic/admissions						
Academic information on majors	9	15	10	14	5	8
Admissions facts/requirements	5	8	8	11	5	8
Cost/Tuition	3	5	0	0	1	2
Financial aid/scholarship	1	2	3	4	1	2
Useful Information – environmental						
Description of student life	7	11	4	5	0	0
Generation of Return Visits - academic/admissions						
Easy/free online application	5	8	16	22	20	28
FAQs/essential facts	3	5	2	3	4	6
Printable application	1	2	0	0	3	4
Generation of Return Visits – environmental)						
Campus visuals/photos/virtual tour	6	10	5	7	4	6
Dialogic Feedback Loop						
Interactive features	2	3	2	3	4	6
Other	8	13	7	10	4	6

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